

# Strong leadership needed on education funding — now

Originally published January 16, 2016 at 4:01 pm Updated January 16, 2016 at 1:24 pm



Gabriel Campanario / The Seattle Times

**Fully funding basic education will cost an extra \$4 billion a year. That's a big number, but last year a \$16 billion transportation package was passed. Apparently money can be raised for roads but not kids.**

By [Randy I. Dorn](#)

*Special to The Times*

REGARDING basic education funding, there is a vacuum in leadership. Studies have been done, but no action taken.

My grandfather used to tell me a fable. A fox explains to a cat that he knows a hundred ways of escaping his enemies. The cat responds that she has one. When a pack of hounds barrels toward them, the cat scurries up a tree. The fox runs around in circles, trying to decide among his plans, until the hounds surround the fox and he is killed.

The moral — action is more important than planning — applies to the state Legislature in the 2016 session. We have studied education funding over and over again. Consider:

- Early 2000s: The Fromhold/Cox committee produced a study.
- 2006: Washington Learns produced a study.
- 2007: The Joint Task Force on Basic Education Finance produced a study.
- 2009: The Quality Education Council produced a study.
- 2012: The Joint Task Force on Education Funding produced a study.

In 2014, as part of the *McCleary v. State of Washington* ruling, the state Supreme Court held the state in contempt for not producing and enacting a plan. In 2015, the court fined the state \$100,000 a day for its inaction. The hounds are nearing the fox. The fox's response? A work group to do another study.

In his State of the State address last week, Gov. Jay Inslee vowed that a work group he convened last year will develop a “framework for the next ... part of our K-12 financing plan.”

We don't need another study. We need strong leadership. We need a governor who will pull the political parties together and hammer out an agreement. Instead, our governor calls for a work group and lets it do the work. That's not leadership.

Besides, a plan already exists.

Created by State Treasurer Jim McIntire and me, it would create a sustainable tax system that would finance the pieces necessary to fully fund basic education. Our plan would ensure that schools have enough teachers and support staff. It would reform our levy system, which is broken but used to pay for basic education costs. It would ensure that the cycle of underfunding isn't repeated.

Fully funding basic education will cost an extra \$4 billion a year. That's a big number. But in 2015, a \$16 billion transportation package was signed. Apparently money can be raised for roads but not kids.

The work on education has to begin now. Experience tells me that significant work must happen in 2016. If not, the state will not be able meet the 2017-2018 deadline it created. The issue is too big to get passed in one session.

In November, I released my budget proposal for this year. I'm asking for \$173 million related to McCleary. The money would be used for additional teachers and more money for each teacher. It would be used for highly capable students, for migrant and bilingual education and for struggling students.

The governor's proposed budget simply doesn't do enough for our children. Without his leadership, a vacuum exists and it has fallen to the Legislature to fill it. I commend state Sens. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, Ann Rivers, R-La Center, Christine Rolfes, D-Bainbridge Island, and James Hargrove, D-Hoquiam, as well as former state Rep. Ross Hunter. All addressed issues key to McCleary during the 2015 Legislature.

My prediction for 2016 isn't optimistic. The charter-school issue might get fixed, but not much will happen with McCleary. The session probably will best be described by the name of a fast-food restaurant I visited recently: In-N-Out Burger. Legislators will want to get in and out of Olympia as quickly as possible.

In his State of the State address, the governor said education funding will be fixed by the 2017-18 deadline: " ... it's the right thing for our kids," he said.

But it was also the right thing for our kids in 2012, when McCleary was decided. It was the right thing in 2013, when the Supreme Court asked how much progress was being made. It was the right thing in 2014, when the court found the state in contempt.

Apparently, it is the right thing to do for roads. Our state constitution tells us, though, that education is the state's "paramount duty." If we can spend \$16 billion on roads, then we can certainly find the necessary money for kids — if our so-called leaders choose to.

The hounds are circling. It's time to act. Now.

*Randy Dorn was elected as the state superintendent of public instruction in 2008 and re-elected in 2012.*